

TV AS ART AS TV

By Fred Barzyk

Can the medium that gave us "Beverly Hillbillies" provide the basis of a creative art form? The answer is "yes" . . . as a growing number of video-artists testify.

It is estimated that the average American spends 1200 hours a year in front of a television set.

Which is a little more than three hours a day.

Or an eighth of a lifetime.

And what does he see?

For the most part, ubiquitous Westerns, soap operas, ancient movies, variety shows that vary little, situation comedies, and commercials—ah, yes, commercials. All about as bland and banal as the typical American kitchen. Which is often where you find yourself.

Then suddenly, every once in a while, out of the blue, something like this comes along:

"Swirls, ripples, slides of color . . . melting human features . . . sparks flying across the screen in lovely, agitated patterns . . . scrolls of light, swirling, fiery paths, brilliantly colored tear-drops elongated and falling . . . little shoals of colored fish-drops, floating, swimming across the screen . . . garlands of dotted lights . . . a piano blazing, disintegrating, crumpling in flame. . ."

That's experimental television. Which is alive and well and doing a land-office business in public television stations across the U.S. Which should be good news to everyone who watches television, and of particular importance to all those engaged in visual communications. The passage I quoted is a description by Edith Efron, editor of TV Guide, of a segment of an experimental television program called "Video Variations," produced by WGBH in Boston in conjunction with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The program came about when the Orchestra received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (headquartered in Washington, D.C.) to test more interesting ways of visualizing symphonic music on television. Since WGBH has been televising live concerts of the Boston Symphony Orchestra for years, it was naturally interested in the opportunity. At the request of the Orchestra, the station supplied a producer, director, equipment and eight artists from outside WGBH for the project. Each artist was given great latitude in his choice of music from the Orchestra's recorded repertoire, and total freedom in the composition of his short, visual accompaniment. The results were, to say the least, unique.

—Stan VanDerBeek, a filmmaker who generally works in controlled patterns of strong, geometric shapes, interpreted Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe" with a stunning barrage of

flowing video effects which appeared almost accidental.

—Tsai Wen-Ying, a cybernetic sculptor who had never worked in television before, constructed a delicate sculpture of thin metal rods which vibrated in response to the music.

—The first and second movements of Schönberg's "Five Pieces for Orchestra" were accompanied by a dreamlike video ballet composed by James Seawright, and his dancer wife, Mimi Garrard.

—Constantine Manos, official photographer to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, selected a series of still photographs to interpret the third and fourth movements of the same Schönberg work.

—Doug Davis, art critic for Newsweek, chose to visually interpret a Bach symphony as a "happening." His event showed a group of people writing and interacting with numbers juxtaposed with streams of other numerals moving through space.

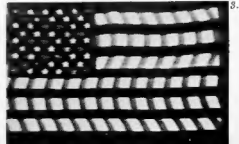
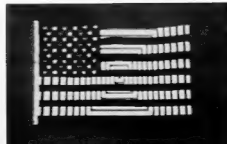
—Jackie Cassen, another filmmaker, combined photographic stills and clips of peace marches and "Wake Up, America" rallies in a collage accompaniment to Beethoven's "Eroica."

—Nam June Paik, a musician-scientist-artist-engineer widely known for his development of the video synthesizer (an optical color generator capable of taking the inputs of multiple black-and-white cameras and transforming them into an infinite number of color designs and patterns) utilized the synthesizer to interpret the music and mythic stature of Beethoven through a series of abstract and real images. The final image is of a grand piano on fire. (This is what Edith Efron was describing in the passage cited above.)

—Russell Conner, member of the New York State Council on the Arts, and formerly assistant curator of the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, also used the Paik video synthesizer. He interpreted a section from Wagner's "Die Götterdämmerung" with a random, abstract visual composition of a nude model.

Eight artists. Eight personal statements. Eight strikingly effective presentations. "Video Variations" quite graphically demonstrates that when art and technology, and in this case videotape primarily, are brought together with taste and imagination, stunning solutions to visual problems can be achieved. It also serves to reveal the emergence of the video-artist as a vital new force in visual communications.

The video-artist, to put it simply, is a writer, composer, photographer, choreographer, filmmaker, painter, sculptor, architect or graphic designer who has brought his, or her, particular talents to television in an effort to utilize the



medium in new ways, and to find new modes of expression for his own art. His genesis rests with the establishment in 1967 and 1972 of three artist-in-residence programs in public television stations in San Francisco, New York and Boston.

One such facility at San Francisco's KQED, founded in 1967, and under the direction of Brice Howard and Paul Kaufman, brought artists and technologists together to work unfettered for a full year before being replaced by another "team." Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts,* the ongoing program was conducted in an atmosphere of pure experimentation geared to advancing the "state of the art," or of establishing a state where none existed, with emphasis on scoring technological breakthroughs.

While no conscious effort was made to produce a "product," an outstanding result of the KQED experiment was the development of a new visual concept called "Videospace," which produced a series of startling visual effects and kaleidoscopic images using existing broadcast equipment. Described by this magazine as "more a new way of looking at TV than a technological innovation," Videospace obviated conventional thinking in the theatrical sense, and "infused the television screen with new meaning."

In Boston, WGBH has received a \$300,000 three-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to bring artists from various fields under its aegis to apply what is learned to the creation of programs that could be shown and tested on the air. The result has been a series of startlingly innovative programs which reinforces the potential of television as an art form, and demonstrates the creative possibilities inherent in the new tools being spawned.

"What's Happening, Mr. Silver?" was one of the first programs developed by WGBH utilizing the experimental criteria established. The overall objective was simply to present segments of experience from a wide spectrum of everyday life, and to do so in a manner which respected the viewers' ability and willingness to judge and find significance in aspects of ordinary existence which they may not have recognized before. Sparked by the creative impulses of David Silver, a young Englishman teaching at Tufts University, the 30 programs in the series never ran along traditional lines. On the contrary, they established a totally new format—the video collage.

The single most important element was the basic technique of juxtaposition, in which a group of separate pieces were

placed together in such a way as to comment on each other, acting as catalysts for presenting familiar material in a provocative manner. This juxtaposition invariably resulted in a sense of surprise and the unexpected. One particularly unusual offering, "Madness and Intuition," utilizing John Cage's theories of chance, featured the outputs of 48 different video and sound sources in an absolutely random process. Artists, actors, technicians, crewmen, directors and engineers were all asked to step out of their normal functions and assume whatever role struck them as pertinent at a given time. Whenever anyone got bored, he simply switched to something else, without rhyme or reason. The point was to expand the role of accidental possibilities in the act of creating for television.

The Educational Broadcasting Corporation, representing both public television station WNET in New York and NET, the national production center, announced in January of this year the formation of its own Experimental Television Center supported by \$218,000 in grants from both the Rockefeller Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts.

Under the direction of David Loxton, the Center's main objective is to attract to television the huge resource of human talent available in New York. Writers, poets, artists, humanists, dramatists, sociologists, critics and choreographers reflecting the spectrum of New York cultural life will be invited to join with ETC's own staff of producers, directors and engineers. Capitalizing on experimental projects from both San Francisco and Boston, the New York Center will develop its own style and approach in bringing thinkers to television and letting them find expression for their ideas through the video medium.

It is obvious to me that each of these artist-in-residence programs fulfills an important function in the growth of the video-art movement:

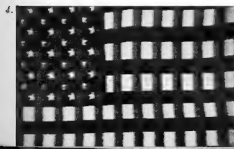
San Francisco—the thoughtful theoreticians, defining the "grammar" and ground rules of the medium.

Boston—exploring the possible synthesis of television communications with dance, music, art and drama.

New York—utilizing TV to implement or extend psychological, sociological or philosophical ideas.

"The landmark show that first attracted attention to TV's avant garde," according to Newsweek, was "The Medium Is the Medium," broadcast by the Public Broadcast Laboratory nationally in 1969. Executive producer David Oppenheim, who convinced national educational TV executives of the need to experiment with the medium, brought together six artists and WGBH.

*The workshop is now known as the National Center for Experiments in Television, with funds from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.



1-5. Title sequence from "The Medium Is the Medium," a landmark show (1969) that first attracted attention to TV's avant garde. Produced by WGBH in Boston, one of the three public television stations that have been funded to explore the potential of the medium, the show was broadcast nationally by the Public Broadcast Laboratory. Designer of title sequence was Fred Barczyk.



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—Artist Allan Kaprow used closed-circuit inputs to four locations in the city of Boston.

—Intermedia artist Otto Plene, in the same program, used only two images to achieve an original statement. One source was a grid of colored dots that dissolved into abstract patterns across the screen. Superimposed on this was a videotape of a young girl climbing to the top of a 40-foot-high polyethylene sculpture filled with helium. The result was a work of surprising elegance.

—Aldo Tambellini, an artist exclusively concerned with "black" as both a concept and social experience, showed some 30 black children in the WGBH studio interacting with 1000 colored slides and no less than seven 16mm films projected into space. The interplay was taped live on three television cameras, and the resultant concentration of images on one videotape created a dense barrage of energy.

—Thomas Tadlock employed his own electronic machine—"Archetron"—to scramble broadcast television symbols in a never-ending kaleidoscopic pattern.

—Nam June Paik used three hippies, a nude dancer and junk TV sets to create an electronic opera on the Moog Synthesizer.

—Jim Seawright painted an electronic picture by tape-delaying the three color tubes of the TV camera.

The artistic manipulation of space, form and color by electronic means is not the only concern of those working on the leading edge of television art. Sound—what you hear as well as what you see—has been the subject of intense scrutiny and extensive experimentation. Innovation in both the graphic and audio sense was underscored in "City/Motion/Space/Game," which televised different, but related, images simultaneously on two television channels (WGBH-TV and WGBX-TV), while two audio-tracks were broadcast in stereo on WGBH-FM radio. To my knowledge, it was the first multi-channel over-the-air broadcast of its kind. Essentially, "City/Motion/Space/Game" was a dance spectacular featuring Gus Solomons, Jr., choreographer and architectural graduate from M.I.T. From moment to moment and often simultaneously, Solomons was seen dancing at various locations around the city, or in the limbo setting of the television studio. Concurrently, two sound tracks carried the various sounds of the city, punctuated by remarks by Solomons about his art and life.

Public reaction to the program was mixed. Some viewers thought it too "gimmicky." But John Allen in the Christian Science Monitor wrote, "For half an hour there was something on the airwaves with as much style and daring—with as much esthetic and intellectual power to provide pleasure and provoke thought—as one associates with experimental filmmaking and contemporary popular music."

One of the most fascinating programs to come out of the WGBH artist-in-residence projects was "Zone," created by an experimental theater group made up of Harris Barron, his wife Ros Barron, and Alan Finneran.

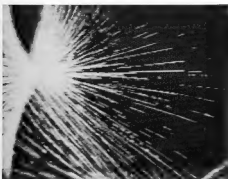
The group sought a way of communicating non-literal, highly

6-8. From "The Medium Is the Medium."

James Seawright, one of the participating artists, painted an electronic picture by tape-delaying the three color tubes of the TV camera.

9. From "The Medium Is the Medium." Aldo Tambellini showed 40 black children in the WGBH studio interacting with 100 colored slides and seven 16mm films projected into space. The resulting interplay, taped live on three TV cameras and concentrated on one videotape, created a "dense barrage of energy."

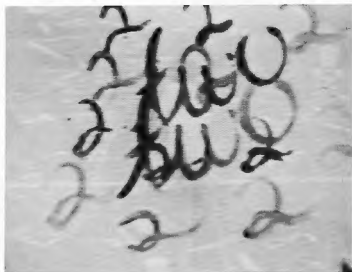
10. From "The Medium Is the Medium." Nam June Paik used three hippies, a nude dancer, and junk TV sets to create an electronic opera on the Moog Synthesizer.



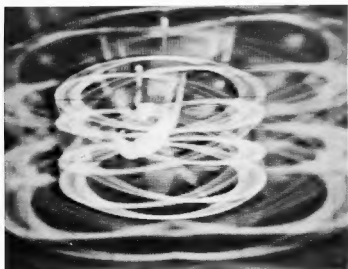
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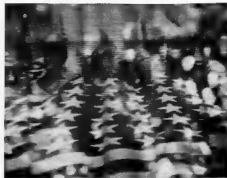
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11. From "Video Variations," produced by WGBH in Boston in conjunction with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, 1971. Stan VanDerBeek, one of the participating artists, interpreted Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloé" with a barrage of flowing, "accidental" video effects.
12. From "Video Variations," Doug Davis interpreted a Bach symphony by showing a group of people writing and interacting with numbers juxtaposed with streams of other numerals moving through space.
13. Same as Fig. 11.
14. From "Video Variations," James Searwright created a video ballet, danced by his wife Mimi, to the music of Schönberg's "Five Pieces for Orchestra."
15. From "Video Variations," Nam June Paik used the video synthesizer (an optical color generator capable of taking the inputs of multiple black-and-white cameras and transforming them into an infinite number of color designs and patterns) to interpret the music and mythic stature of Beethoven through a series of real and abstract images.
16. From "Video Variations," Jackie Cassen combined photographic stills and clips of peace marches and "Wake Up, America" rallies in a collage accompaniment to Beethoven's "Eroica."
17. "City/Motion/Space/Game," 1968, featured Gus Solomons, Jr., dancing at various locations around Boston. The images, different but related, were carried simultaneously over WGBH and WGBX. At the same time two sound tracks carried the various sounds of the city, punctuated by remarks by Solomons about his life and art.



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symbolic information to a mass audience. In one particularly effective segment, light polarization, color reversals and a variety of "keying" devices were used to show the merging of a man and his television set. Through changing effects the man becomes the image he is watching on the screen, while the television set takes his place. The production was under the direction of David Atwood.

At this point it is pertinent to ask why the burden (or the blessing) of TV experimentation—developing new techniques and equipment, extending the proposition of the medium as an art form—has fallen to the public broadcasting system, rather than the commercial networks? The answer, of course, is obvious: Costs. Experimental television, even on a rudimentary basis, doesn't come cheap. A television studio, complete with technicians and crew, costs \$4000 a day or more. A video synthesizer can run from \$15,000 to \$30,000.

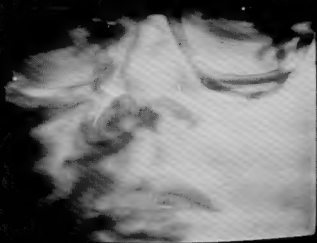
Help, however, is on the way for broadcast and cable systems. The development of a highly portable video-recorder—the Phillips PCP-90 color camera and an Ampex VR-3000 video-recorder—promises to bring the number of production personnel within manageable bounds. Instead of the 15 engineers usually used on remotes, the number of technicians has shrunk to three. WGBH has already used the system for the production of a complete series, "Jean Shepard's America," with gratifying results. Not only did the PCP-90 permit on-location taping with considerably less strain, it also provided for the expression of a highly personal statement.

However, only the most sophisticated broadcast TV stations can presently afford this equipment. It will be the introduction of portable, three-quarter-inch and one-inch video equipment that will ultimately change the industry. If broadcast quality can be obtained thereby, the cost of TV production will be cut in half. My prediction is that this is going to happen within the next two years.

As things stand today, commercial networks on the whole refuse to foot multi-digit bills without assurance of a sizable share of a viewing audience. No experimental television program, of course, can offer such assurance. Indeed, they are not intended to do so (although "What's Happening, Mr. Silver?" was an eminently successful series in terms of numbers of viewers). Thus, for the time being, private and governmental funding constitute the life-source of experimental television, and dedicated radicals serve as its practitioners.

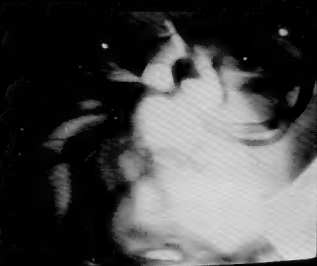
This isn't to say that experimental television and the technology it is spawning is without profit potential, either from an individual or a corporate standpoint. Even a cursory glance at the list of applications of video-art sends one's imagination soaring. More and more experimental television works are becoming the subjects of museum and gallery exhibitions. In early 1970, the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, for example, conducted the first campus exhibition devoted to video-art exclusively. The Whitney Museum in New York is currently conducting a similar venture, at which viewers not only see the latest creations by video-artists, but

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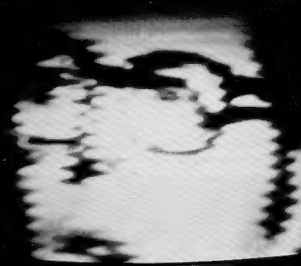


KODAK SAFETY FILM

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KODAK SAFETY FILM





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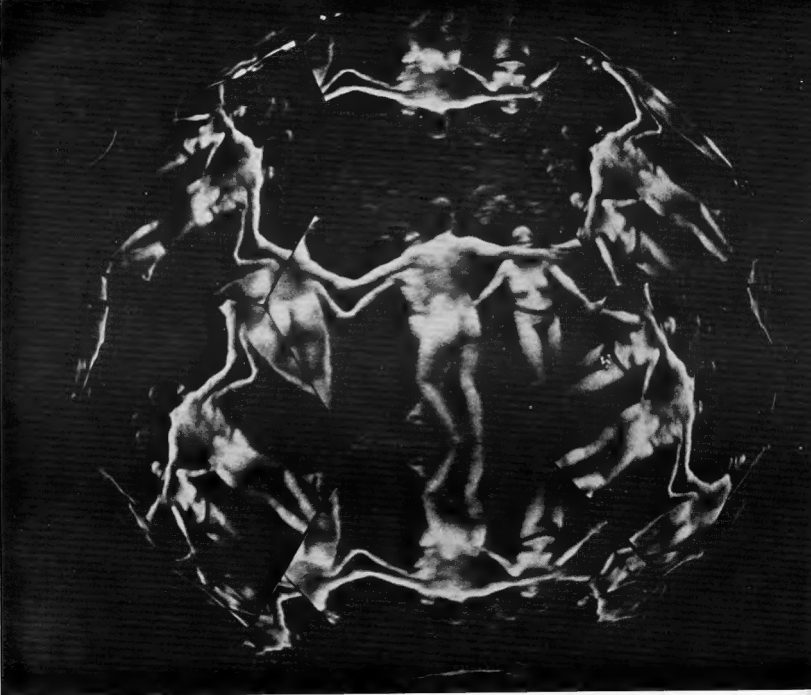
18. Demonstration of video synthesizer by Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe at exhibition of electronic art held at New York's Bonino Gallery. Photo: Peter Moore.

19. Videotape still from "IHeimkringla!," a play produced by KQED in San Francisco. (KQED is another of the three public television stations funded to do experimental work in the medium—the third being WNET in New York.) Producer Brice Howard, director Tom O'Horgan, and all the other artists and technicians involved in "IHeimkringla!," used a technique called "Videospace," wherein a mosaic of color and halftone images is achieved by tampering with electronic circuitry via synchronization, amplitude, modulation and amplification. Using existing TV equipment, the show's creators were able to make on-the-spot visual changes, such as halos, outlines and graphic mirages. Photo: Robert Barclay.

20. Charlotte Moorman performs "Concerto for TV and Videotape," by Nam June Paik, during electronic art show at Bonino Gallery. Photo: Peter Moore.

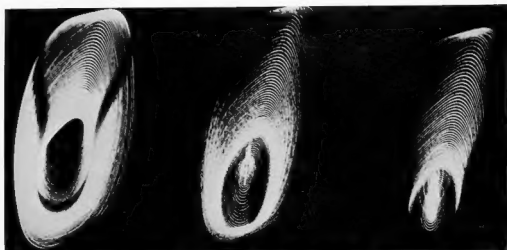


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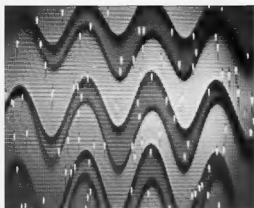


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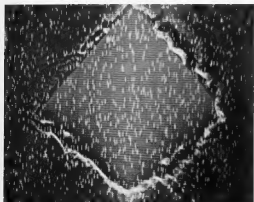
21. "Innertube, a one person Video Environment by John Reilly and Rudi Stern"; from "Vision & Television," an exhibition at Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1970. "A kinetic video environment for one person at a time," says the exhibit catalog about the work. "The theater for one is a cathode ray tube. One sees subliminal images of oneself intercut with specially created pre-taped material. The participant relates to himself in juxtaposition with the social, the erotic, the purely kinetic. One becomes part of a video time capsule. The instant merges with the preconceived and the two become kaleidoscopic." Photo: Jay Good.



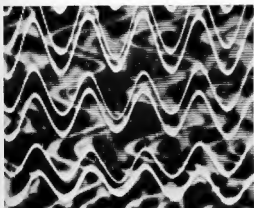
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22. "Black Spiral," by Aldo Tambellini in collaboration with Tracy Kinsel and Hank Reinbold of Bell Labs; from "Vision & Television" exhibition. A set was recircuited so that all regular broadcast imagery was transformed into a constantly moving spiral drawn into the center of the tube.

23-25. "Synthesized Video Images," by Stephen Beck, KQED, San Francisco. Photos: Margaret D'amer.

compose their own video-art with the manipulation of a few dials. Plans are also underway at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to expand upon this type of "exhibition."

As the attention of the art community is focused on synesthetic videotapes (the merging of two images or techniques on videotape), it is quite conceivable that an abstract video-art composition may one day command as large a sum on the gallery auction block as a Jackson Pollock or a Jasper Johns. The Leo Castelli Galleries in New York has already sold several private videotapes to collectors. When one considers the reproduction rights advantages of an "original" or master tape, the prospects for monetary gain become immensely appealing.

Commercial advertisers and their agencies are beginning to toy with the idea of using the explosive effects of video-art as the basis for commercials. My own experience with this type of end-use, however, prompts me to state that extensive application must await the day when the multi-layered decision-making process along Madison Avenue is reduced. Few are willing to extend the corporate neck at this time, even though most advertising people agree that the need for a multi-media approach to the solution of visual problems is becoming more and more apparent.

In the final analysis, experimental television can and should be used as an instrument for enriching the television output of the entire country—making art an organic part of everyday life. In addition to serving as the basis for special programs, the special effects engendered by the manipulation of electronic circuitry are being used to emphasize or "hold" a story line together in conventional dramas, such as Kurt Vonnegut's "Between Time and Tribulation: A Space Fantasy," a show recently produced at WGBH-TV.

As the dimensions of television screens increase to the size of living room walls, soon-to-be-developed instruments will be used to project electrons as "wallpaper" of kaleidoscopic colors and design. Mass-produced video synthesizers in the hands of home viewers will permit one to alter colors, patterns and images to suite the décor of the room, the time of day, or the mood of the moment.

Cost and the inaccessibility of equipment still rank as the major obstacles to be overcome by experimental television teams. TV, in fact, may not exist as a truly creative art form until it becomes as cheap to produce a show as it is to Xerox a piece of paper. That day may be upon us sooner than you think.

Fred Barzyk has been a producer/director at WGBH in Boston since 1958, and has established his reputation in the television avant garde with productions of "The Medium Is the Medium" and "Video Variations with the Boston Symphony Orchestra." He won three Ohio State awards and a citation from National Educational Television for his show, "Madness and Intuition," in the series, "What's Happening, Mr. Silver!" Barzyk's latest work is a Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., special for public television which incorporates "video-art" in a drama structure. He has experimented with two-channel multi-media broadcasts and stereo drama, and was instrumental in the allocation of funds for the creation of a video synthesizer.